

The End or the Beginning Times?

Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...

The other day as I was driving through town I noticed the sermon title on one of the neighboring church signs that read, "Is the End Close?" ...

Now I don't know what the preacher plans on saying (but my guess is that he will use evidence of the pandemic, the civil unrest that we see not only in the United States (but across the world), the loosening of morals, the numerous natural disasters and global warming, the closing of churches last spring, and possibly even the outcome of the election – to not only paint a picture of a world about to collapse (but as evidence that the end is also near)...

And to be honest with you – I can see how tempting it might be to believe that the end of the world is just around the corner... and I can see why a preacher would want to preach an 'End Times' sermon today...

In fact, I felt that way many times – like the day that Bridget (our youngest) showed me how they taught her in school how to run in a 'zig zag' fashion (should she be chased by a school shooter)... or the day I couldn't resist but watch an ISIS video (where a man was placed in a cage and burned alive)... or when Kim Jong Un and President Trump threatened each other with nuclear missiles... and of course, who can forget how we all felt (on September 11th, 2001)?...

And we see these things going on and we wonder to ourselves – has the world gone mad (and could this be a sign of the end times?)....

But is the world (any worse today) then let's say (25 – 50 - or even 75 years ago)?...

I can remember reading a story about a man who was arrested in Nazi Germany for holding up a sign that said, "Freedom"... while he was in prison he remained strong and defiant – refused to give in or recant – and never once backed down when threatened with violence...

But then a strange thing happened – the man was released from prison, went home, and then committed suicide... and the reason being (when he went home - he found out through neighbors - that it was his own son who had betrayed him - and turned him over to the police) ... and not long after that story was first told – more than 60 million people would die in a war (that introduced some of the sickest – most cruel – forms of evil – the world has ever known)... do you not think that

even people in that day wondered to themselves (if they were experiencing the end of the world)?... Of course, they did... just like many wonder today...

You know, it's been my experience that churches do one of two things when it comes to talking about the 'Last Days' (also known as the Apocalypse – which literally means, 'an uncovering')... and what I've discovered is that churches either *never talk about* the End Times at all - (or it's the only thing they ever talk about – always trying to figure out the signs of our times – or pointing to Israel as a barometer of what God might do next – or looking to decipher hidden codes that only prophetic scholars (and a really good computer) can decipher)... once referred to as 'Biblical Code'...

And sometimes you see people like Radio personality Harold Camping (make false claims about the world coming to an end – like he predicted would happen on May 21, 2011) – causing many people to do drastic things (and still others left afraid and confused)... and only when those dates came and went (would he admit that he was wrong all along)...

And so, when readings like the ones we see in our bulletin this morning (from Daniel, Chapter 12 – and Mark 13) – both predicting a 'future cosmic event that would bring suffering and destruction on the earth) - I am always hesitant to ignore it (but even more hesitant to speak about it with a 'prophetic authority') especially because I don't believe that anyone can.....

What I'd rather do is tell you what I know about the End Times (and then let you draw your own conclusions) ...

And let me quickly say (that in order to understand how these apocalyptic writings got into our Bible) it's important to mention *that since the beginning* the Jews believed that they were *God's Chosen People* (chosen to tell the whole world about the 613 commandments of the monotheistic God – known as Yahweh)... but (because of their small population) God's Children knew that the only way that would happen (is if God intervened)...

Which is why you'll read in Scripture very frightening descriptions of what the "Day of the Lord" will look like – (and there are many – all painting a grim picture for the enemies of God)...

we see this in Amos 5:16, Isaiah 13:6, Joel 2:1 – the Book of Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation – In parts of Matthew's Gospel and in our Gospel reading from Mark 13 (all have something to say about the 'Day of the Lord' ... and the idea is that

when God enters into the world - (to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven) – nothing (and no one) will be able to stop it... and always in apocalyptic writings it mentions that it will be *sudden, shattering, and terrifying*...

Now it's important to remember that when these passages were first written (the Jews knew no freedom)... they were at times slaves to the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and in Jesus' day (they were being occupied by the Romans)... and so it was only natural that God's Children (were always hoping for God to supernaturally intervene (in a very mighty way)... much mightier than their enemies...

Which is why I agree with Reformed theologian, William Barclay when he writes, "*These books were dreams and visions of what would happen when the day of the Lord came and in the terrible time immediately before it*"... and then goes on to say, "*but, it must be noted, all these books were dreams and visions... they were attempts to paint the unpaintable and to speak the unspeakable... they were poetry, not prose... they were visions, not science... they were dreams, not history... but they were never meant to be taken prosaically as maps of the future nor as timetables of events to come*"...

The point is – could the world come to an end today (or tomorrow) and bring about God's Judgement?... and could it be that right now (especially with all the things we see going on in the world) that we are in the end of days?... it could (and if it's not, the Bible does tell us that eventually it will happen)...

But Jesus also tells us in Matthew 24:36, "*But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*"... and then goes on to say in verse 44, "*So then be ready*"...

And isn't that the question we asked ourselves last week... how can we be found ready?...

Well, Martin Luther once said, "*If I knew that tomorrow was the end of the world, I would plant an apple tree today!*"... in other words, Luther understood that no matter what tomorrow may or may not bring (we should always be found nourishing the earth (and all that's in it as a testimony to our Lord) with seeds of goodness - and with a deep seated desire to share blessing in it today)... because the fear of tomorrow cannot live in a heart (that's being ruled *by faith in the power of God*)...

So, let me close with a story about a little girl who seemed to understand this concept...it was a story first told on the Today Show (about a 6 year old girl named, Elana Desserich, who had every reason to fear tomorrow) after being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer... I'm sure you can also imagine the horror of the parents (along with her sister Gracie...

And like it would be for all of us they prayed night and day that Elana would somehow be given a miracle and live... but in August of 2007 she died peacefully in her sleep.....

But the amazing part of this little girl's story is what was discovered about her after she died... because a few days after the funeral - Keith, her father, - found a note that said, "I love you mommy and daddy"...

a couple of days later another letter popped up that read, "I love Gracie" (with 10 to 20 hearts all around that sentence)... and for months the couple kept finding these notes that were hidden all around the house – in the most unusual of places... notes that expressed the love she had for her family... in fact, the family now has three shoe boxes filled with these notes...

And to think that a little girl (only 6 years old) would spend the last few months of her life giving back and sharing her love – makes me wonder if we should also do – the same (especially in these dark days)... because even if this is the last day on earth (it's also the beginning of a new day – and a new opportunity – to serve the Lord)... and until the Kingdom does arrive (God has always promised His love) which should give all of us reason to be glad and rejoice in it...

Jesus says, *"Of that hour or day no one knows, not even the angels of Heaven, but only the Father – and to those who have ears I say – be ready"...*

May God's peace be ever present in your life, May His wisdom always be in your heart, and May His love be found in every word that you speak...

In Jesus' name we pray!

Amen!